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SIR,

The following Act, which was passed in the ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINNIA, at the beginning of this year, affords an example of legislative wisdom and liberality never before known, and must please all the friends of intellectual and religious liberty. It was lately printed at PARIS; and you will do an important service by assisting in circulating it. Had the principles which have dictated it, been always acted upon by civil governments, the demon of persecution would never have existed; sincere enquiries would never have been discouraged; truth and reason would have had fair play; and most of the evils which have disturbed the peace of the world, and obstructed human improvement, would have been prevented.

NEWINGTON-GREEN, July 26, 1786. R. P.

BRITISH 20JY64 MUSEUM

Act for establishing RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, *passed in the* ASSEMBLY *of* VIRGINNIA, *in the beginning of the Year*, 1786.

"WELL aware, that Almighty God hath created the mind free: that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who being Lord of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either--that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical (who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinion and modes of thinking as alone true and infallible, and such endeavouring to impose them on others), hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time,—That, to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical,—That even the forcing a man to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor, whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and withdrawing from the ministry, those temporal rewards, which, proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitted labours for the instruction of mankind,—That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than on our opinions in physic or geometry,—That, therefore, the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence, by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has a natural right; and tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally conform to it,—That though indeed those are criminal who do not withstand such temptations, yet neither are those innocent who lay them in their way,—That to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy; which, at once destroys all religious liberty; because he, being of course judge of that tendency, will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others, only as they shall agree with, or differ from his own—That it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interpose when principles break out in overt acts against peace and good order. And finally, that truth is great, and will prevail if left to herself; is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error; and can have nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition, disarmed of her natural weapons (free argument and debate) error ceasing to be dangerous, when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

"Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever; nor shall be forced, restrained, molested or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief. But that all men be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion; and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

"And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own; and that, therefore, to declare this act irrevocable, would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted, are natural rights of mankind; and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural rights."

LAIDLER, Printer, Princes-Street, Leicester-Fields.